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ABSTRACT

Two opposing views of composition instruction--one emphasizing the creativity and self-involvement of the student (or producer), and one emphasizing the communication produced (the product)--can be reconciled through a perspective that emphasizes the process of composition. It is in process, defined as "the act of composing" or "the act of producing," that all student composing takes place. Both producer-orientation and product-orientation in the composition classroom can shortchange process. Producer, product, and process are not mutually exclusive, however, and all three elements, determined by the purpose of the discourse, can function together to turn the classic, one-dimensional communication triangle of encoder-signal-decoder into a three-dimensional prism. Teaching or writing must provide aims and occasions and be centered on process, allowing individual writers the freedom to engage process in ways that observation and experience have shown writers really use.

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Humpty, Alice, and the Composition Prism:
A Perspective on Teaching Process

For some time now I've seen the conflict between
Humpty Dumpty and Alice in Lewis Carroll's Through the
Looking Glass as a paradigm of a continuing conflict in
the teaching of composition. You may recall their argument.
Humpty announces:

"There's glory for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course
you don't--till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice
knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down
argument,'" Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a
rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it
to mean--neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can
make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is
to be master--that's all."¹

Because Humpty would no doubt argue that the speaker is to
be master and Alice would argue that the word is to be master,
we can explain their different viewpoints in terms of positions

on the communication triangle (Figure 1.). That is, Humpty looks at communication from the perspective of the discourser, the producer of communication; Alice looks from the perspective of the communication produced, the product or composition.

Their positions seem to me representative of a schizm separating composition teachers. Humpty's position emphasizes the creativity and self-involvement of the student; Alice's position emphasizes the forms and structures to which writers must conform. The Humptian comp teacher sees the student as an individual who has a right to his own language; he believes that both the student's language and the personality that language makes clear to the world are victimized by the controls and restrictions of those who teach with a repressive, prescriptive view of language and of education. The Humptian is non-judgmental, allowing the student to do her own thing, encouraging her to respond to the world in her own way, telling it as she sees it on her own terms. The Alician comp teacher is the opposite, seeing the student as subordinate to the content of the course; she is result-centered, measurement-centered, standing by a scale of antique design weighing the products, inspecting them for their conformity and accepting or rejecting them by their ability to meet a set of specific standards. The Alician is rather like a quality-control inspector on an automobile assembly line. While the Humptian gets in, drives, and worries less about the quality of the vehicle than its ability to get him somewhere, the Alician is concerned with design and maintenance, allows no customizing,

and assumes the vehicle's reliability by inspecting and examining its parts, never by road testing it.

Continually we find composition theorists and teachers taking up one of these positions. Either they take the Humptian view and emphasize the producer or composer or they take the Alician view and emphasize the product or composition. While these emphases may be elected for legitimate and compelling reasons, they draw attention from a significant element of discourse which the communication triangle does not graphically represent: the element of process. It is in process that all the composing our students do takes place. The most significant recent research in composing, like that of Janet Emig, Marion Crowhurst, and Donald Graves, has been concerned with the composing process. But the communication triangle does not represent process graphically and therefore is a model incomplete for discourse theory and inadequate for the teaching of writing. Although theory need not be concerned with process, teaching must be. If we teach from theories emphasizing either the producer or the product, we will teach one those two things--that is, we will prescribe how to be a certain kind of producer, someone who tells true, for example, or describe what a certain kind of product is like, a research paper or classification essay, for example. Moreover, we will devise our teaching to create procedures which result in certain kinds of writers or papers. The student may go through the writing process alone, gauging his success by the teacher's response to his product or his persona. Process is often largely ignored in the classroom.

Of course, both the Humptian and the Alician would claim they teach process, but, alas for Alice, we can demonstrate that we are operating with different meanings for "process". Humpty sees process as "procedures used by certain kinds of producers when they write"; if you present a specific persona, you must have followed the "correct procedures." Alice sees process as "specific procedures to produce a specified product"; by checking your paper for prescribed elements she can tell if you followed what she thinks are "correct procedures." Both define process in terms of something else, rather than in terms of itself. But if we change our perspective, if we define process as "the act of composing" or "the act of producing", we change our ability to define it prescriptively--you can't prescribe process unless you have a certain product or certain producer in mind; you can only describe it or do it.

These distinctions among definitions of "process" are important for an understanding of the shortcomings of much discourse theory as a practical source for classroom pedagogy. Because much discourse theory is formulated through the examination of products, it has approached the composing process from a product-orientation or bias; consequently, the classroom pedagogy drawing upon such theory has been devoted more to product-orientation than to process. For example, Kinneavy's explanation for choosing the term "discourse" rather than such terms as "communication," "rhetoric," or "composition" for his theory is in part that, for him, discourse refers to "the full text (when feasible) of an oral or written

situation...it can be a poem, a conversation, a tragedy, a joke, a seminar discussion, a full-length history, a periodical article, an interview, a sermon, a TV ad."² His choice of "discourse" depends upon his understanding the term as referring to the signal, the product; by analysing how the product was produced, he arrives at his theory of discourse. The transferral of this theory of discourse into pedagogy is likely to be similarly product-centered.

Another example of product-centering is Hirsch's The Philosophy of Composition, which might more aptly be named The Theory and Pedagogy of Revision. It might be argued that Hirsch is really audience-centered, because of his insistence on "relatively readable prose," but since he provides little discussion of how one determines "relativity" in regard to a variety of audiences or a variety of subjects, we are left to find the real audience to be Hirsch himself and his judgment of what "relatively readable prose" is. So far as the communication triangle is concerned, Hirsch gives no attention to how we can control the interaction of composer, subject, and audience. So far as rhetoric is concerned, his subject is style, particularly stylistic revision, the final preparation of a product. If we add to this his insistence upon a "standard grapholect," a written language impervious to change and therefore masterable, we see a really Alician approach to composition. Moreover, his heavy reliance upon traditional handbooks and 19th century composition theory aligns him with the courses and textbooks of traditional rhetoric, which are chiefly concerned with style as the final preparation

of product.³

The emphasis on producer in teaching composition is at base derived from a reaction against the emphasis on product. Rules, regulations, and restraints dehumanize the persona and the composer as well, and the prose becomes lifeless, uncommitted, impersonal--Engfish, in Macrorie's popular term. The advantage of producer-centering is that it de-emphasizes product and, rightly, I think, helps make writers who are involved in and committed to the writing they do. That has been the great contribution of the open classroom approach and the pedagogical texts and theories of Macrorie, Elbow, and Lou Kelly. But those who have been unable to, in effect, take onto themselves the mantles of these teacher-theorists have found producer-centering more useful for creating an environment rather than accomplishing a goal. The students come to have a good attitude toward their writing but the teachers are often as dissatisfied, for different reasons, as they were with "Engfish." As with product-orientation, producer-orientation can shortchange process.

Note here that I do not mean to treat emphasis on producer, product, or process as mutually exclusive: to promote a certain kind of writer is to create a certain kind of written work; to get a specific kind of written work demands a specific kind of writer; a sense of persona, of oneself as a writer, and a sense of the kind of writing you hope to do are automatically features of process. For example, Moffett's spectrum of discourse, which in one dimension is expressed as a range of products, is created by examining the lines of

the communication triangle connecting speaker and listener and speaker and subject. The whole idea of the communication triangle is to graphically render the intersecting of the points, a dynamic relationship, and Moffett is right to caution that his linear model falsifies a lot, in part because it takes "the speaker-listener relation first, then the speaker-subject relation."⁴ The linear model is less able to show concurrent interaction. The communication triangle does.

Still, the one dimensional triangle has severe limitations as a model, not only for avoiding a clear indication of the element of process but also for overlooking the influence of function or purpose on writing. The linear model used by the Schools Council Project on Written Language of 11-18 Year Olds and identified with James Britton provides three primary functions along a continuum of the speaker's role in a range from spectator to participant. Once again, this linear model fails to consider the interaction of speaker, subject, and audience; it is significant for its sense of the range of writing functions, literary, expressive, and transactional, and its sense of the relationship among these functions, as well as its recognition of expressive writing as an underlying matrix for all three functions,⁵ but other models make the valuable connection between function and rhetorical elements. Kinneavy persuasively provides an overlay of aims of discourse on the communication triangle, joining expressive writing to the composer or producer, referential writing to the subject, persuasive to audience, and literary to product.⁶

A variant of Kinneavy's model which does not include literary writing is that of Richard Lloyd-Jones. He describes expressive writing as composer-oriented, explanatory writing as subject-oriented, and persuasive writing as audience-oriented.⁷ In either case the recognition of function as an element of discourse makes a significant addition to the communication triangle. As Kinneavy points out, "purpose in discourse is all important. The aim of a discourse determines everything in the process of discourse. 'What' is talked about, the oral or written medium which is chosen, the words and grammatical patterns used--all of these are largely determined by the purpose of the discourse."⁸

By adding purpose to the elements available for interaction, we come closer to a model which graphically represents the composing process, but the definition and delineation of purpose in Kinneavy, as perhaps it must in theory, leads to a static emphasis on the kinds of products such purposes produce. In other words, while it is important to add the element of purpose to the communication triangle, it does not yet give us a sense of process, although, as we have seen, the definition of a product may formulate a prescriptive procedure. To add the element of process we need, as Moffett suggests, a model of more than one dimension which "could justly represent the simultaneous play of the speaker-listener, speaker-subject relations, and the many wheels within wheels."⁹ Such a model would change our understanding of the relationships of the original triangle and create a new perspective not only on a discourse model but on a pedagogical model, as well.

Observe the following model (Figure 2): a composition prism, triangular, with the original elements of the communication triangle at one end and product at the other, and a revolving cylinder in the center representing, in D'Angelo's terms, "a holistic and organic process" moving "from an undifferentiated whole to a differentiated whole," from one end of the prism to the other.¹⁰ I am suggesting that product is removed from the initial shifting interactions; it is a result, not an original element. Separating the original elements from the result is the whole complex mechanism of process, where the original elements are measured and mixed according to purpose, react to one another, are spun out, drawn in, reshaped and altered, all in a kaleidoscopic, indescribable, unprescribable series of activities, Moffett's many wheels within wheels.

Many modifications could be made here depending upon how complicated one wishes to make the model. We could add a system of tubes throughout the prism structure to show the constant feeding in of speaker, subject, and audience influences all along the the process. We could add a system of holes on the process cylinder to show the varying means by which these influences are measured, brought in, spun out--perhaps there are even various cylinders, each with holes designed according to the aim of discourse the cylinder represents. We might mark sections of the prism for rhetorical categories--invention, arrangement, style--so long as we show that, as D'Angelo points out, "invention, arrangement, and style are connected to each other and to underlying thought processes

in important ways" and that "the process of invention continues throughout the composing process."¹¹ I see the possibility of much refinement here. Certainly I don't intend for this model to be absolute and definitive but rather tentative and suggestive. Its main virtues are three: it allows room for the significant addition of purpose to the essential triangle of communication; it differentiates among the rhetorical elements and places product in a way that illustrates its relation to those elements; and it adds the important dimension of process. Moreover, this model can serve to bridge the gap between the Humptian and Alician views of composition pedagogy.

We stand at the threshold of significant discoveries about the writing process, about the abilities of students at various age and grade levels, about the aims of discourse and how people really go about meeting those aims through a process. If we arrive at some theoretical basis concerning the writing process, we will face some of the same dangers I have been concerned with here--chiefly, that we will begin to prescribe processes. For example, invention is an area of increasing interest to rhetorical scholars and an obvious and significant aspect of the composing process. Yet I have been reluctant to add invention to my composition prism because of the difficulty of separating it from arrangement and style and because I am apprehensive about systematizing too much. Moffett's cautions about his own insights apply here and to other expressions of systematic theory; he wrote of his spectrum of discourse: "Heaven forbid that it should

be translated directly into syllabi and packages of serial textbooks...the theory is too schematic to be true and we would know a lot more now about growth in reading and writing if textbooks had not prevented teachers from actually finding out those facts about sequence that the textbooks were guessing at (but advertising as scientific truth)."¹²

Systematizing could lead to approaching invention as product, as I think some scholars already have, prescribing procedures and measuring their success against specific models. I would rather see this composition prism used as a model which reminds us how intangible and protean the composing process is. Just as an explanation of its exact mechanism is made unlikely because of all the variables we have to consider, so in our teaching we cannot hope to prescribe means to cope with every variable without limiting the processes our students experience. But writing in the real world is not product-centered or really producer-centered--it is purpose-centered, focused on aim and an occasion. Our teaching of writing must provide aims and occasions and be centered upon process, allowing individual writers the freedom to engage the process in ways observation and experience have shown us writers really use. Although ultimately as teachers we are concerned with both the producer and the product, our principal role is as concerned and helpful bystanders to the process, centering our attention not on the composer or the composition but on the act of composing by a composer creating a composition.

The composition pedagogy which stresses the composer is ultimately reconcilable with the composition pedagogy

and theory drawn from the examination of products only if both are recognized to be elements of something more inclusive. It may be that discourse theory cannot easily be translated into teaching practice because theory tells us about something and practice tells us how to do something. In composition classes students don't need to learn about; they need to learn how, and theory that inspires pedagogy must be grounded in an understanding of how rather than in assertions about.

I think these concerns can be met in the classroom, the two sides can be reconciled. After all, shortly after their argument, Humpty Dumpty and Alice work together to explicate the opening stanza of "Jabberwocky," two opposing approaches to language working in tandem to make sense out of nonsense. The sense of anything has to be tackled in the process, in the prewriting, writing, and revision stages, rather than at the final preparation stage, where the concern is with the way it sounds. If process is the realm of sense and product the realm of sound, we can reconcile Humpty Dumpty and Alice by following the advice Alice is given by the Duchess: "Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves."¹³

Figure 1.

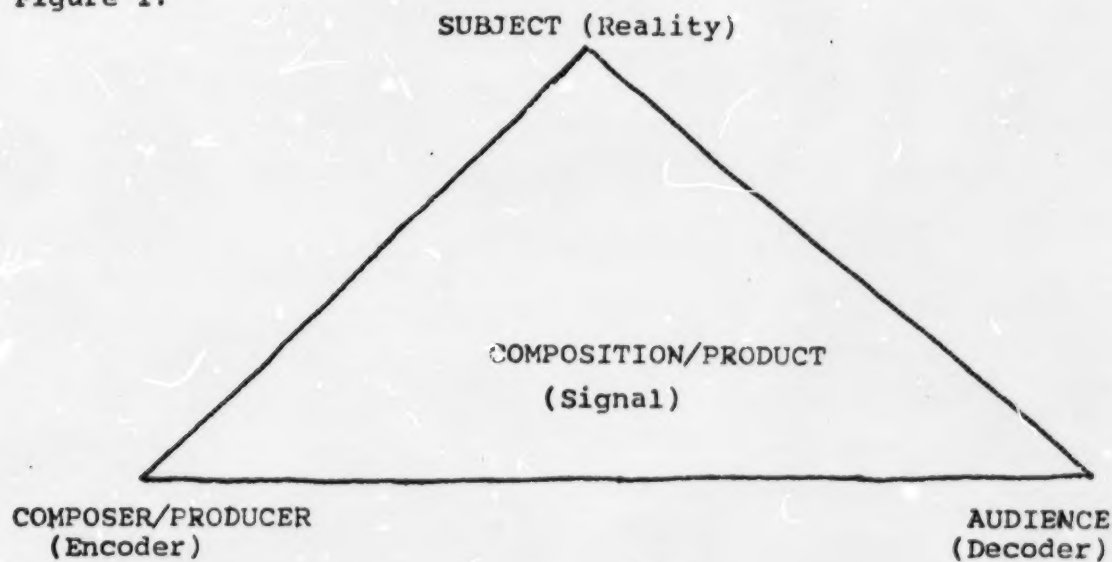
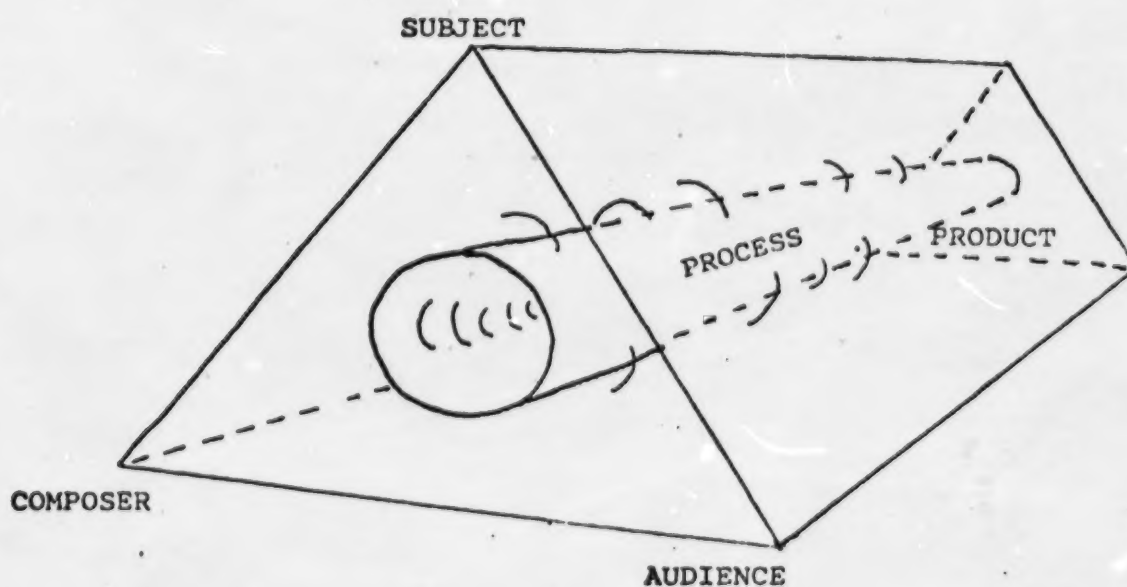


Figure 2.



Notes

1. Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland & Through The Looking-Glass (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, n.d.), p. 230.
2. James L. Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 4.
3. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., The Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 140-168.
4. James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), pp. 47-48.
5. James Britton et al., The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18) (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1975), pp. 79-86.
6. Kinneavy, pp. 38-39, 58-61.
7. Richard Lloyd-Jones, "Primary Trait Scoring," Evaluating Writing, ed. Charles R. Cooper & Lee Odell (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1977), p. 39.
8. Kinneavy, p. 48.
9. Moffett, p. 48.
10. Frank J. D'Angelo, A Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop Publishers, Inc., 1975), p. vi.
11. D'Angelo, p. vi.
12. Moffett, p. 54.
13. Carroll, p. 96.